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THE ACCELERATION OF MORAL PROGRESS

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WE Americans, and those among the warring nations of Europe who have leisure for reflection, stand aghast at the revelations of human hatred, cruelty, and barbarism which this past year of our Lord has thrust under our eyes. Where is all our boasted moral progress, our Christianity, our dream of the brotherhood of man? What was it all but a thin veneer over the black depths of brute selfishness and savagery? No wonder if many despair of the capacity of man to progress morally, and others look impatiently about for some new force to do for him what all the churches and societies have hitherto failed to do. It was, therefore, a timely as well as an interesting article which appeared in a recent number of *The Popular Science Monthly*[1] with the contention that the hope for moral progress lies along the line of eugenics.

Hitherto, the thesis of this paper ran, morality has been almost wholly a matter of social inheritance, a set of traditions imposed from without upon each succeeding generation, adopted by imitation and suggestion, perpetuated largely through fear of the penalties or social ostracism which follow upon deviation, but always more or less external to human nature itself, crossing its desires, demanding repression and conformity. Such a situation is pregnant with danger. Red-blooded youth will always be rebelling against its constraints; and any great wave of passion, like this present war, will fling its shackles to the four winds. Evidently there can be no secure morality until men are born with altered natures, with impulses and desires organically adjusted to the needs of their human situation, so that they instinctively and spontaneously choose the right. In short, our problem is that of "securing the preservation and perpetuation of a human stock that may be depended upon to lead moral lives without the necessity of much social compulsion." "Abiding human progress can come only through the improvement of the stock of the people."[2]

Now we may all agree that such an undertaking, if feasible, is desirable, and indeed of the utmost importance. Who does not long, at least in his saner moments, to be delivered from "the body of this death," from all the harassing temptations, the lusts and longings and passions, that lead him off on this tangent or that, deflecting him from the wise and virtuous life that might otherwise be his? If we could only have been born with an overpowering inclination towards virtue, how much trouble we might have been saved! And if by regulation of marriages, by sterilization or segregation of the immoral, or any other eugenic proposal, we can secure for future generations freedom from the tyranny of passion and a life of spontaneous virtue, we should be willing to make the necessary effort and sacrifice.

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[1] By Professor F. Stuart Chapin, in the May, 1915, number.

[2] Article referred to, pp. 469–70.

But is the undertaking in any degree feasible? Let us consider it more closely. Has any one any idea how to go to work to secure "a human stock that may be depended upon to live moral lives"? Whom shall we marry to whom? That we can breed a healthier race seems undeniable; and in so far as immorality is due to low vitality, pathological derangement, organic depression of spirits, we may hope for some relief. We may perhaps succeed in breeding a more intelligent race; and in so far as immorality is due to underwittedness and stupidity we may hope to diminish it. That this is the limit of expectation seems implied in the phraseology of the paper referred to; for the author sums up his contention by saying that "we ought to get into our *mores* the idea that the children of the present generation must be born of physically healthy and mentally capable parents."[3]

Certainly we should aim to breed a healthier and more intelligent race. But will that ensure us a more moral race? We do not need this present war to enforce this lesson. Think of the Alexanders and Attilas and Napoleons throughout history; think of the Macchiavellis, the Talleyrands, the Bismarcks. Are health and mental ability in any wise a guaranty of morality? On the contrary, unless they are early and successfully enlisted in the cause of right, they are the greatest source of danger to the community. The stupid and silly may oftener do wrong; but they are not clever or strong enough to invent wrongdoing on any great scale, or to escape detection in their petty crimes. It is the criminals of great vitality and mental alertness who baffle our detectives, or, still worse, get into positions of power where they can mislead the people and further their selfish ends without incurring liability to punishment. Thus the eugenic proposals, though admirable for other ends, are not adapted to the end here sought. The task of making a man healthy and intelligent can be, to some extent, performed before he is born, by the proper selection of parents. The task of making him moral must, perforce, wait till he is born and begins to grow up.

But why can not we breed directly for morality, by preventing the parenthood of the criminal and vicious? Some men seem to have a more fortunate moral endowment than others. One child has a congenital explosiveness of temper, one youth an imperious lustfulness. Another is naturally more sympathetic, gentler, or more fearless. We

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 471.

do not start side by side in our moral pilgrimage. Then why not prevent the birth of those who would be most seriously handicapped?

The reasons why this is impracticable are numerous and obvious. In the first place, it is questionable if any instincts are in themselves bad; man's potentialities of evil are also potentialities of good. An imaginative boy sees at the "movies" the tale of a successful crime; he imitates it, is sent to jail, and becomes a hardened criminal. But that same imagination, restlessness, inventiveness and daring, if properly utilized, might have made him a great inventor, or explorer, or aeronaut. A man shows cowardice in danger. But perhaps that is the result of an extreme sensitiveness to pain, a high-strung state of nerves, which would be a very valuable endowment for an artist or an actor. Your bad-tempered friend may be one who sees more clearly than you the faults of people and cares more passionately for his ideals; train him to patience and he may be worth ten of his apathetic neighbors. The apparently selfish man may be cherishing some purpose for the sake of which he is steeling his heart against the calls upon it; his determination, concentration of energy, single-mindedness, are rare virtues, and need only to be balanced by a clearer recognition of the rights of others. The lustful man is the man of passion, who under favorable circumstances might have become a great poet or patriot. Shall we dare to weed out of our human heritage any single instinct, and say that future generations will be better off without the potentialities which it offers?

But even if we could be sure which *traits* ought to be exterminated, we should still find it impossible to determine which *individuals* ought not to become parents. For to breed for any single trait would imply disregarding all the others that would inevitably be fostered or weakened by our interference. While we were carefully breeding out selfishness we might incidentally be breeding out energy, mental keenness, invention; or breeding in, say, an over-susceptibility to alcohol or to sex incitement. He that is abounding in sympathy may be lazy, shiftless, untruthful; he that is poor in that virtue may be rich in other potentialities. We are like the children in the "Birds' Christmas Carol"; he that had a necktie had no collar, and she that had shoes had no stockings. Who is competent to judge which of the concrete blendings of impulse is on the whole deserving of extinction? The problem would be as impossible of solution as that of the God who, according to the traditional conception, has to divide human beings into sheep and goats, the saved and the damned. The fact is that one person is worth saving in one respect, another in another.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that it is impossible to be sure which qualities of a man's character are inherited, and therefore transmissible to his children, and which are acquired. An irritable, illtempered individual, for example, whom we might doom to sterility for that fault, might be merely suffering from some organic irritation whose removal would leave him as patient and sweet-tempered as another; even if it were never removed, his children would have no unusual natural irritability. On the other hand, traits which are deep-rooted, and will be passed on from generation to generation, may be lying dormant, for lack of the right influences to bring them out, and go unsuspected. We inherit, after all, only potentialities; and they are but dimly to be guessed through performance. The reproductive value of a man is to be measured not in terms of what he has done, but in terms of what he might have done under widely varying circumstances; it would only be by trying him out in every type of situation and under every sort of influence that we could know what is in him. All sorts of heroisms and lusts slumber in us, unknown even to ourselves; and to judge of the value of the potentialities which any given man is going to pass on to his descendants is quite beyond our powers.

Moreover, heredity is not so simple a matter as the enthusiastic eugenist is apt to assume. A child inherits the forgotten traits of a host of ancestors, and often fails to inherit the most striking of his father's or mother's traits. There are the facts of variation, and the complexities of the Mendelian law, to be borne in mind. When two people, each with a complex ancestry, marry, who can predict what the result in inherited instinct and capacity will be? A parent with a streak of insanity may bear a child who will be a genius; a parent who is a great philosopher or poet or statesman may have a son who is an idiot. We can hardly guess what strain, itself abnormal, may be of greatest value when blent with a different strain in parenthood. The mechanism of heredity is so intricate that with our present knowledge we are hardly competent to meddle with it, when it is a question of producing such a complex result as moral endowment.

Finally, the attempt to interfere with parenthood to the extent necessary to produce any appreciable changes in the instinctive endowment of future generations would not for a moment be tolerated in our times. Would you acquiesce in enforced sterility because you have, say, a congenitally explosive temper? or because you have shown a callous selfishness in pushing under your business rivals? When we think of state interference with marriages in the interests of morality, we imagine, of course, that we personally should be selected for parenthood, while the poor unfortunates in prisons and poorhouses would be prevented from marrying. But it may well be that many of the prisoners in Sing Sing have better blood in them than you. Are you sure that if they had had your opportunities they would not have done better with them than you? or that you, under their temptations, and with their lack of good influences and training, would not have landed in Sing Sing? It is true that a large proportion of prisoners and paupers and prostitutes are feeble-minded; we may agree to their segregation for life or sterilization. But to a large extent crime and vice are the result, under fostering influences, of tendencies which exist in us all. And if we have had reasonably happy lives in spite of moral defects, we prefer to risk parenthood and trust to our children to get along as well or better.

What then? Is there no hope for the acceleration of moral progress? Yes, there is much hope. But it lies in the improvement of the old methods of moral teaching and training. Morality is something acquired by each generation, and not something transmitted by parents to offspring; we can greatly facilitate its acquisition. Morality is functional, not organic; it results from the way we use our powers and direct our instincts, not from their inherent nature. But we are not trying on any large and systematic scale to provide competent training in the art of life for our youth. We employ experts to teach them Latin and mathematics; we see to it that they know how to build bridges properly if they are to be engineers, or fill teeth properly if they are to be dentists. But we leave the most important training of all, the training that shall show them how to guide their desires and instincts, how to avoid the snares and pitfalls of life, how to be steadily and honorably happy, to the haphazard attention of parents, who are for the most part themselves ill-trained and ignorant of how to live. We need not despair of the efficacy of moral training, for we have hardly begun to try it.

The churches and Sunday-schools do a good deal, but theirs is little more than a one-day-a-week influence, on a minority of the population; and that more or less distracted or obstructed by theological interests, and offered in terms often unassimilable. Moreover, the homilies of the preacher are usually more or less discounted; it is his "job" to exhort. The actual perplexing problems of living are seldom taken up in the churches and discussed in a free and unbiased manner. It is clear that in our present chaotic religious situation, with numberless sects offering divergent doctrines, and the work of teaching done mostly by volunteers, young men and women of no special training or fitness for the work, we can not expect the crystallization and maintenance of clear and generally accepted codes through the work of the churches alone. The great task of moral education must be undertaken by the schools.

Our educational system is fairly good on its informative side, and in the mental drill it provides. But in its moral training it is inexcusably deficient. What if our school-superintendents and college presidents were to recognize that the prime function of education is to alter habits of conduct? What if our school system were to seek from the beginning to impart an interest in right living, were to discuss concrete problems of conduct, and to quicken conscience, by the many methods known to skilful educators? It could then turn out multitudes of boys and girls trained to a code, as knights were trained in former days to courage and chastity and the service of the weak. What if loyalty to school and college were to come to mean primarily loyalty to that code; so that for a Harvard man anywhere to be detected in lying would be a shame to the college, or for a Yale man to use unfair methods in business would be to make his classmates blush and brand him as untrue to his *alma mater?*

Sinners there will continue to be, no doubt. Our human heritage includes instincts that are rebellious against any restraint; and the best of moral training may, now and then, result in failure. But the difficulties in the way of a task are no excuse for not undertaking it. We must give our youth insight into the possibilities of right living; we must arouse their interest in learning better ways, their enthusiasm for ideals. In this moral education, rather than in eugenics, lies our real hope for the raising of the general standards of moral conduct.